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THE UNNECESSARY DEFEAT

AGAINST all the odds the striking miners and their families held firm into the New Year. Deserted though they had been by the TUC, the mining communities fought on, sustained by the vast solidarity network which had grown up around them. They had been out for ten months, nearly three months longer than the 1926 lockout. It was an astounding achievement.

Then in mid-January the strike began to crumble. The number of miners breaking the strike began to rise. Coal Board hopes of a post-Christmas 'surge back to work' were disappointed, but 5,170 miners crossed picket lines according to the NCB in the first full working fortnight of 1985.

Then the trickle threatened to become a flood on Monday 21 January. The strike was crumbling fast in the Northumberland coal-field and 593 went back in one day in Yorkshire, the heart of the strike. The **Financial Times** called it 'a very black Monday' for the NUM.

What had happened so to weaken the strikers' resolve? Two elements were involved. One was the NCB's domino strategy. They concentrated their efforts on particularly vulnerable areas, then used successes there to widen the cracks in the strike elsewhere. This strategy of undermining the strike piecemeal, Area by Area, had a number of advantages.

Psychologically it was difficult for strikers to hold on once a majority of the miners in their Area had gone back. Also banks and building societies had had little incentive to foreclose on miners' families in an area where the strike was solid — the effect would

simply be to bring down property prices. Once most miners were back at work it was much easier to put pressure on those still out to join them or lose their homes.

The NCB had already pursued this strategy back in the late summer and early winter, devoting attention to pits closest to Nottinghamshire — the North Derbyshire coalfield and Manton and Shireoaks in South Yorkshire. Now they drove deeper into the Yorkshire coalfield, concentrating their efforts on the pits nearest to where scabbing had already taken off — Kiveton Park and Dinnington — and on pits in the traditionally less militant North Yorkshire panel. They also aimed first at the more isolated miners, living not in close-knit mining communities, but scattered across the Leeds and Sheffield conurbations.

The strategy paid off on Black Monday — 21 January. At three pits — Kiveton Park in South Yorkshire, Kellingley in North Yorkshire, and Killoch in Ayrshire — miners went back in organised groups of respectively 150, 70, and 135, according to the Coal Board. By the end of the week the management at Kiveton Park was claiming that 432 out of 735 miners were scabbing. The surge in scabbing took place even though Arthur Scargill had spoken at Kellingley and Jack Taylor at Kiveton Park the previous weekend.

The NCB's inroads were made possible by a growing sense of directionlessness among the strikers, even in the most militant pits. A miner from Silverwood in South Yorkshire put it like this:

Before Christmas, people who were loyal to the union had something to look to. There were supporters bringing stuff down. We didn't feel so isolated. Now people are actually seeing the possibility of defeat . . . People are asking what's happening; they hear stories, and they're not getting answers from the officials. Even people who are active in the strike are discontented.

The fact that there were no significant power cuts was an important element in the demoralisation. When Peter Walker claimed early in the New Year that there would be no power cuts, Peter Heathfield agreed with him, to the despair of many strikers. Activists hoped that the first national executive of the New Year would put forward a new initiative to deal with this situation, but the NUM leadership as a whole pretended there was no problem. The Yorkshire leaders continued to wind down the picketing, and none of the other Area leaders criticised them — though for the first time Arthur

Scargill addressed a meeting of Yorkshire power stewards. As a Silverwood miner said:

The strikers have been told all along: 'Don't bother with your own activity, General Winter will do it for you.' Now General Winter is here, and it's not been done for them. They can see their backs are against the wall and they're saying: 'If we can't get out of this one way, why don't we get round the table for a compromise?'

Neither the Yorkshire Area nor branch officials did anything to counter this. On the contrary, they blocked efforts to involve more miners in picketing. One Yorkshire miner told **Socialist Worker**:

Since Christmas all the militants have had the stuffing knocked out of them by the official committee. It's taken all the picket transport off. We had 60 or 70 really good militants from one village, but there was only one van left to take them to the picket line. And then our treasurer says: 'Don't fetch them anyway, we haven't got much money.'

The effect of do-nothing officials was most evident in North Yorkshire. Here the key pit was Kellingley, the biggest pit in Europe, with 2,300 miners. If Kellingley cracked, it would undermine the heartland of the strike. As one Kellingley miner said:

I'll tell you what breaks people in this pit. The union delegate here is a bloke called Howard Wadsworth. He stood up a few weeks ago and said: 'We've lost.' Then he sent out these little letters asking you what you felt about the strike and the union. He did it without the union's backing.

There must have been 250 blokes went back because of that. He admitted it at a meeting: 'It's my fault. I take responsibility.' But the union have taken no action against him. There's a lot of feeling against him in the rank and file.

Another North Yorkshire pit, Fryston near Castleford, stayed solid, with only 20 scabs out of 1,100 miners at the end of February. The branch president, Roy Wright, who had been kept away from the strike by jail and then bail conditions for three months, returned to Fryston mid-February:

When I came back, I was shocked at how the strike had turned the other way in North Yorkshire. Some of the lads who've gone

back have been on picket lines. They've given up through bad leadership.

From day one of the strike I've got up at one, two, three in the morning to go everywhere in England with my pickets. But what's running this strike down is that other branch officials have gone home to bed after paying out the lads to go picketing.

They're out for a free ride on the union. They got union positions, then they get on the council — they get on this and on to that. They don't want to know about the men who put them in power.

This failure of leadership by the branch officials could have been countered by a clear initiative from the Area executive. But in Yorkshire Jack Taylor and the rest of the leadership let things drift until the end of January, when they organised mass pickets at Cortonwood and Houghton Main. But these were solid pits in the heartland of the strike, much less in need of a boost than the more exposed collieries where the NCB offensive was at its fiercest. The neglect of these pits increased the scabbing there, as one Kellingley striker explained:

When there was mass picketing, it was good for the morale. You're in the majority and you feel you're all behind the strike in a mass picket. But when only a few of you stand there, you see the scabs all going in, nothing happens, you go home, pick up the paper and read lies, watch the telly. No wonder people are losing faith.

The officials' failure did not mean that nothing could be done. Where the militants organised independently the strike held solid. One example was Silverwood, where in mid-February only 27 out of a workforce of over 1,200 were scabbing. This success was all the more remarkable because many Silverwood miners lived in Sheffield or Rotherham rather than in pit villages. One Silverwood miner told **Socialist Worker**:

In some pits men who haven't been involved in the strike who then find themselves in very serious financial difficulty, are too embarrassed to come and ask the union for help. They think that because they haven't been active and the first time they've been down is to ask for help, that the union will just laugh at them. It's those miners that the NCB hope to break.

What we've done is to go round and explain to people that,



A greeting for the scabs at Silverwood

no matter what, if they've got a problem, contact us and see us. I can tell you it's worked. One kid I saw had no gas on and had got three kids. He'd got gas central heating. Just imagine, in this weather, no heating, no hot water, and three kids. He couldn't do any cooking because he had a gas cooker. After I saw him, I contacted the branch treasurer, who got onto Sheffield NALGO. Within two days we had his gas back on. Now this same bloke was up at 4.30 this morning out picketing with us.

At Easington, where there were pickets of 500 or more even in January, the militants scored a notable success when they organised the whole village to jeer at a scab who tried to walk into work instead of taking the NCB bus. His massive police escort — the village had been under virtual military occupation since the summer — were outnumbered and unable to make mass arrests. The next day there were nine fewer scabs, and the man who had been the focus of the village's wrath was on the picket line.

These examples pointed to a strategy which could counter the Coal Board's back-to-work drives — a strategy of building the

involvement of every striker, of visiting the doubters, of returning to the mass pickets, above all of overcoming the divide between the active minority of pickets and the majority of passive strikers. It was a strategy that appealed to many activists — as was shown by the success of a series of meetings organised by the Socialist Workers Party, by the wide sale of the **Socialist Worker** pamphlet 'How to turn the tide', and by the impact of leaflets produced by an informal group of Yorkshire miners who were independent of the SWP. But it was a strategy that the Area leaderships and many branch committees rejected. Amazingly, even as the scale of the scabbing grew, some branch officials were refusing to allow pickets to visit miners at home.

Consequently, the return to work was extremely uneven. The **Financial Times** acknowledged on 6 February that 'substantial pockets' were still 'nearly 100 per cent solid', including the entire South Wales and Kent Areas:

In Scotland . . . there is a particularly sharp 'north/south' divide, with pits in the south showing on average a 50 per cent attendance, and the northern pits — in Fife — . . . very few . . .

In Yorkshire, with 6,272 men back from around 50,000 miners the pits are split . . . In the Barnsley pits of Dearne Valley, Kinsley Drift, Darfield Main, Grimethorpe and Royston Drift at most eight miners are back at each pit, going down to as few as two. In the whole of the Doncaster area, only 404 men have returned to 10 pits, with Frickley, Goldthorpe and Hickleton being among the most solid.

In the North East the traditionally moderate Northumberland field has shown a return to work of some 50 per cent: in Durham, however, a group of pits have bucked an otherwise rapid return to work trend. These are Easington, with 61 back out of 2,169 men; Murton, with 110 back out of 1,502; and Eppleton, with 180 back out of 864.

The strike had been weakened, but not broken. It would take a section of allegedly left-wing officials to do that.

The union split?

There was a second major threat to the miners' strike in January 1985 — the possibility of a breakaway scab union. A number of branch officials had played a crucial role in organising the strike-breaking in Nottinghamshire from the very start. Area elections held

in July 1984 swept supporters of the strike from branch office in Nottinghamshire. The scabs now controlled the branch committees. They included 27 of the 31 delegates to the Notts Area council, and every member of the Area executive except Ray Chadburn and Henry Richardson.

The scabs waited until December, when it was clear the TUC would do nothing to defend the miners' union against the courts. The Notts Area council met on 20 December, and voted to change their rule book to give them autonomy from the NUM.

The scab delegates voted to delete the area's rule 30: 'In all matters in which the rules of the [Area] union and those of the national union conflict, the rules of the national union shall apply, and in all cases of doubt or dispute the matter shall be decided by the National Executive Committee of the national union.'

This decision exposed the truth behind the scab leaders' declarations of loyalty to the national union. The essence of the decision to form the NUM in 1944 had been to create a genuinely *national* union in the coalfields for the first time, in which the miners' delegate conference was the 'supreme authority and government' of the union. Now the scab organisers were committing themselves to a reversion back to the days before 1944, of a federation of autonomous county unions.

The NUM national executive voted to summon a special delegate conference on 30 January. They would recommend that the scabs be expelled unless the Notts Area council withdrew the rule change.

They also approved further amendments to the NUM's own rule-book. Changes to rule 12, which determines the composition of the national executive, had been demanded by the 1983 NUM conference, to end the scandal whereby, for example, three small right-wing Areas — Cumberland, Leicestershire, and North Wales — had between them a tenth of Yorkshire's members and the same number of seats on the national executive. The nub of the proposals was to reduce the number of Areas from 18 to 12. To all intents and purposes, Lancashire would absorb Cumberland and North Wales, and Midlands swallow up Leicestershire, South Derbyshire and Power Group.

The proposed change was basically democratic. It aimed to make the executive genuinely representative of the union's membership. But, coming with the threat to expel the Notts scabs, the executive decision helped to galvanise support for a breakaway union. A Notts delegate conference voted on 16 January to sack Henry Richardson as Area general secretary because of his support for the

strike.

Roy Lynk was appointed to act in his place, and announced that he was preparing to form a new national miners' union if the NUM conference carried out its threat of expulsion. Two other scab Areas, both threatened with extinction by the proposals, South Derbyshire and Leicestershire, voted to support rule changes which made them, like Notts, autonomous.

The prospect of a breakaway union presented a serious danger to the NUM. The miners' leaders offered a deal to those involved. Scargill met the South Derbyshire leaders on 22 January, and the national executive meeting the next day voted to defer indefinitely the special conference. The organisational changes which had so angered South Derbyshire and Leicestershire were shelved.

The scab organisers too had good reasons for avoiding a showdown with the NUM. There was evidence that many working Notts miners did not want a breakaway. Up to a third had early on supported the strike, and many more might have done so had they not been so badly misled by Chadburn and Richardson. Scabbing on the rest of the NUM had been legitimised by appeal to the national union's rule book which the scab leaders now wanted to tear up.

So opposition to a split built up. At Ollerton a branch meeting voted 117 to 94 against a split, only to have their decision ruled out of order by the chair. Colin Clarke, Pye Hill branch secretary, who had proposed the rule change giving Notts autonomy, suffered the humiliation of his own branch voting two to one to discuss a proposal to invite Scargill to address them. The arch-democrats controlling the branch committee reacted by walking out of the meeting.

Also, despite all their public enthusiasm for ballots, the Notts Area officials never considered holding an Area ballot on the rule change that was to separate them from the national union.

Arthur Scargill's endgame

The **Financial Times** pronounced on 26 January:

The mineworkers' strike, as a living entity with some sap left in it, is over. The final moves are of vital, perhaps paramount, importance: but they *are* the end game.

Despite this judgement, the strike was to last for another month or more. Perhaps the miners didn't read the **FT**. The strike lasted so long, despite the hammer blows it suffered in January, because there

was still much to play for.

If the NUM was faced with defeat, there was more than one sort of defeat. One was devastation — unconditional surrender by the leadership, and the disintegration of the union as a fighting organisation. The other was a defeat in which the miners held together, preserving their organisation and fighting spirit. One would allow the Coal Board to rule the pits with a rod of iron, the other would allow the miners to rebuild their strength and fight again.

The Tories knew this perfectly well, which is why for the next month they held out against any fudged settlement of the strike which would allow the miners to claim anything remotely like victory. But avoiding devastating defeat meant that the miners themselves had to hang on and avoid ending the strike on just any terms.

The Tories weren't invulnerable. The early weeks of 1985 saw turmoil on the world's financial markets, as the dollar soared and the pound sterling sunk lower and lower. The costs of the strike had been enormous. A document leaked to Channel Four News revealed that the CEGB would lose over £2 billion because of the switch from coal to oil. Estimates of the total costs by the time the strike ended varied, but £4 billion seemed like a minimum — far more than Thatcher had spent to reconquer the Falkland Islands.

The NUM's hand was strengthened by the solidity of the core areas of the strike — South Wales, Kent, and parts of the Yorkshire, Scottish, and Durham coalfields. If the militant areas held firm, the Tories might find themselves forced by economic pressures and the prospect of the strike lasting through much of 1985 to concede terms which would at least leave the issue of pit closures open and stop victimisations.

There followed a poker game between the government and the NUM leaders, in which each side played on the other's nerves, in the hope of causing them to crack. Arthur Scargill came into his own. Back in July he had won the grudging admiration of the **Financial Times** labour editor, John Lloyd, who had written: 'In his willpower, tactical intelligence and lack of inhibition he surpasses all his colleagues in the leadership.' Now Scargill devised stratagem after stratagem to keep the strike going.

It was a brilliant performance. Scargill was fighting for his political life, as well as for the future of the NUM. He had the backing of the other two national officers, Peter Heathfield and Mick McGahey. But their hard line was only possible because of the courage and determination of the communities in the core areas of the strike.

Scargill toured the North East. For the first time he no longer talked of victory at his rallies. Instead he appealed to miners not to return to work, but to stay out until a 'sensibly negotiated solution' had been reached, warning that scabbing would lead to a position 'where management control your lives to a life-and-death situation'. When the miners returned at the end of the strike, he said, they would 'walk back together in the knowledge that you fought not only as hard as anyone could, but more besides.'

Peter Heathfield met the NCB industrial relations director, Ned Smith, on Monday 21 January. Smith was one of the old school of Coal Board officials, highly critical of MacGregor's abrasive style. Clashes with the NCB chairman had led to Smith's early retirement, due on 3 February. Here was his chance to pull off a final coup, and settle the strike.

Heathfield and Smith went a long way towards drafting an agreement. The closure programme would be withdrawn until stocks were rebuilt. Both sides would reserve their respective rights — the NCB's to manage the industry, the NUM to defend miners' interests. The miners' union would continue to oppose closures of 'uneconomic' pits.

Smith had exceeded his brief. Heathfield left the meeting and read a report in the **Evening Standard** that the talks were a flop. The story was the result of a briefing from Downing Street, but the same line came from NCB headquarters.

Three days later Ian MacGregor moved to torpedo the settlement, after consulting Energy Secretary Peter Walker. While the miners' leaders were meeting in Sheffield, the Coal Board issued a statement demanding 'a written indication that the union is prepared to help resolve the problem of uneconomic capacity' and that the NUM 'co-operates with the essential tasks of loss-making pits.' It was a call for unconditional surrender.

Thatcher moved quickly to back MacGregor up, first during Question Time in the House of Commons that afternoon, and later on television, where she reaffirmed the NCB demand for the miners' surrender: 'Let's get it written down. I want it dead straight, honest and no fudging.'

The **Observer** reported on 27 January:

Throughout these shifting debates, it has been clear that Downing Street and the Coal Board have been closely in touch. The shadowy figure of David Hart, usually described as an 'adviser'

to Mrs Thatcher, but whose role is played down in public, was much in evidence, acting as a go-between for Downing Street and MacGregor . . .

The **Financial Times** (26 January 1985) discerned

two main currents within government and the NCB. One, favoured by the Board's senior, consensual-minded officials, their Energy Department counterparts and at least at times, Mr Peter Walker, the Energy Secretary, and Mr David Hunt, his Coal Minister, is that a negotiated settlement should result in a clear statement of the Coal Board's right to manage and close loss-making pits, but not what could be seen as a public humiliation.

Mr MacGregor and the Prime Minister, together with their advisors (some of whom are common to both) have a different aim. That is to ensure that the end of the dispute makes it wholly clear that 'Scargillism', which they define as a mixture of industrial coercion allied to revolutionary ambitions, must be seen to fail, and fail utterly.

The flurry of publicity surrounding these brief talks nevertheless managed to slow down the return to work. The Coal Board's figures for Monday 28 January and Tuesday 29 January were 915 and 182 respectively, sharply down compared to a week before. The effect was, however, only temporary.

Meanwhile a campaign was beginning to form, among NUM officials, for a return to work without a settlement. The idea surfaced publicly in the **Financial Times** on Saturday 2 February, but had been circulating around the NUM headquarters at the beginning of that week. Scargill dismissed the proposal as a 'complete fantasy'. However, it had support in South Wales, where the Area's research officer, Kim Howells, was one of the first to raise the idea publicly.

The proposal was put on the agenda for the NUM executive. Jack Taylor said it should be discussed 'very seriously'. Scargill, it seemed, was being boxed in.

Once again Houdini escaped from the trap. Scargill produced, like a rabbit from a hat, the leaders of the deputies union, NACODS. Scargill had been quick to point out that the NCB's demand that the miners' union accept the principle of the closure of 'uneconomic' pits meant that the Board's agreement with NACODS in October wasn't worth the paper it was written on. On the other hand, Peter Walker

had told a radio interviewer on 30 January that if the NUM accepted the NACODS agreement 'there would be an immediate end to the dispute'.

Scargill moved quickly to exploit this contradiction, and at the same time to head off pressure within the miners' leadership for either surrender or a return to work without an agreement. The NUM executive meeting turned into a joint session of the two union's executives. They issued a statement calling on the Board 'immediately [to] resume full negotiations without pre-conditions.'

Scargill had won another round in his poker game with Thatcher. The return to work figures the following week were half the previous week's figures. But he had bought only a little more time. The NACODS executive refused to include a threat of industrial action in their joint statement with the miners' leaders. They asked only for talks.

The Tories increased the pressure. Thatcher told the Young Conservatives that the miners' leaders had 'brought Luddism back to Britain'. She backed up the Coal Board's demand for unconditional surrender:

If the NUM accept that economic factors must be taken into account in deciding the future of pits, if they accept the right of the Board to take the final decision after all the procedures have been completed — then a settlement is ready and waiting.

If the miners accepted all that, what need would there be for negotiations?

On cue, the courts moved into action. Mr Justice Scott granted scabs an injunction banning mass picketing at five South Wales and eleven Yorkshire pits. Writing the Tory picketing guidelines into law, he ruled that there could be no more than six pickets at any one colliery. On 18 February Mr Justice Staughton granted the ship-owners Stephenson Clarke an injunction ordering the crews of three ships to end their eleven-month ban on moving coal from the North-East to the Thames power stations. The judge granted an order even though the seafarers had overwhelmingly voted in a ballot to continue the blacking. So much for the judiciary's enthusiasm for ballots.

The NUS leader, Jim Slater, went to see the crews the following day, and told them he was withdrawing any advice or instructions he had given them to black coal. Only two months earlier he had told a rally in Blyth on 12 December that, 'rather than back down from supporting the miners' he would 'do a term of imprisonment.'

Slater wasn't the only left trade union leader now to be getting cold feet. British Rail decided at the beginning of the year to move against workers at Coalville depot, who had stopped coal moving from the scab Leicestershire coalfield since 3 April 1984. Three railworkers were sacked. The Coalville men demanded action from the NUR leadership, which responded by calling a one-day strike on 17 January in the Midlands and Eastern regions, rather than bringing the entire weight of the national union behind them.

The extent of the solidarity that could be tapped was shown on 17 January — not only were the affected regions solid, but unofficial action halted many Southern Region lines. Still, it was plain enough that the railworkers' leaders wanted out, despite their public protestations of solidarity.

The growing isolation of the miners from the rest of the trade union movement was to be underlined during the next, and as it proved, final stage of negotiations. Norman Willis, the TUC general secretary, now moved into the limelight. Willis got in touch with Ian MacGregor. After half a dozen meetings a document, drafted by the Coal Board but modified by the TUC, emerged on 13 February. Willis presented the draft to the NUM and NACODS executives meeting at Congress House on Friday 15 February.

The draft incorporated the NCB's basic demands: an 'economically sound industry' was in 'the interests of the membership of the NUM'; 'uneconomic' pits would have to be closed. The miners' executive responded by proposing a four-paragraph statement deleting all references to 'economics', which was swiftly rejected by the Board in its turn.

There followed a weekend of executive meetings. Scargill wanted to stand firm against the Coal Board document. But according to the **Financial Times** on 19 February, 'the majority of executive members, led by Mr Emlyn Williams . . . and Mr Jack Taylor . . . told Mr Arthur Scargill . . . that he could no longer get support for his policy of rejecting the NCB's document . . . out of hand.' Taylor and Williams 'warned Mr Scargill that if no new initiative could be got off the ground in 48 hours, they would consider leading their men back to work,' the paper had said the previous day. Williams had come to the meeting armed with a resolution passed by South Wales delegates on 13 February demanding a national conference, clearly in the hope of getting a decision to end the strike.

With Scargill now in a minority, the executive rewrote the NCB document, deleting references to an 'economically sound industry',

but accepting the Board's final say in closing pits subject to the amended colliery review procedure. The Coal Board now declared their document 'non-negotiable'.

That evening Scargill passed on to Willis the NUM's request that he should have another go. In desperation, Willis requested a meeting with Thatcher herself. On Tuesday, he went to 10 Downing Street, accompanied by the six members of the TUC liaison committee monitoring the strike. It was just under a year since Thatcher had last met the TUC, when she contemptuously rebuffed Len Murray's pleas for the trade unionists at GCHQ.

This time the meeting was 'cordial'. Peter Walker, with Thatcher's support, agreed to modify the NCB document, overriding MacGregor's objections. In exchange the TUC seven made it clear that they were negotiating a final agreement on behalf of the NUM. The **Financial Times** of 21 February reported: 'The "constructive" attitude shown . . . by Mr Norman Willis . . . and his colleagues impressed ministers — including the Prime Minister.' The feeling was mutual. 'What a magnificent woman!' exclaimed one of the TUC seven on leaving Downing Street.

The government were under pressure. A MORI opinion poll published in the **Sunday Times** on 10 February showed Labour and Tories running neck and neck. Only 34 per cent of those polled thought Thatcher 'a capable leader', her lowest rating since June 1981, and 60 per cent thought the government were handling the miners' strike 'badly'.

But the government weren't really offering anything. The substance of the NCB document remained. Ambiguities which seemed to conflict with the NACODS agreement were removed, and the clause referring to the need for an 'economically sound industry' was marginally modified. That was all. But by involving the TUC in making these changes, the government ensured that, should the miners reject the document, they would be isolated from the rest of the trade union movement.

Imagine the surprise of the TUC seven, fresh from their paper triumphs in Whitehall, when they met the miners' executive on the evening of Wednesday 20 February. Far from being congratulated, they were questioned closely. Jack Taylor in particular was nonplussed to learn that what they were confronted was not a basis for negotiation but *a final agreement*.

The executive rejected the document unanimously. The NUM special delegate conference summoned to meet the next day backed

them. Even right-wingers opposed the document. 'Quite honestly, I think we have been conned,' said Lancashire miners' leader Sid Vincent. Northumberland president Dennis Murphy summed up the miners' contemptuous attitude to the TUC: 'If you send a boy to do a man's job you've got trouble.'

Faced with the Coal Board's terms in all their harshness, none of the miners' leaders could put their names to a document which gave MacGregor a blank cheque to close down pits. It just wasn't on.

But Walker's stratagem had paid off. When the miners' leaders met the TUC the following Monday to appeal for action finally to be taken to implement the Congress declaration of solidarity passed in September, Willis told them 'nothing doing'. The NUM were on their own.

The soft left engineer a return to work

The miners' special delegate conference voted on 21 February to continue the strike. Ten days later, on 3 March, another conference voted to return to work without an agreement. Why did they reverse their decision so quickly?

It was not because the miners' position had become untenable. The basic calculation behind the argument for hanging on still held true. The Tories were worried about their slide in the opinion polls. The pound was still under pressure on the foreign exchanges. After the decision to return had been made, the **Financial Times** acknowledged on 4 March that

anxiety about the oil price and the rising dollar may have triggered the sterling crisis earlier this year, but it seems fairly clear that the effects of the miners' strike played an important part.

Had the NUM held firm, the government's nerve might have cracked, and the miners at least won terms which secured the reinstatement of victimised strikers. As it was, the nerves of a section of the miners' leaders cracked first.

There was more to it than that. The final decision to go back was the result of a virtual coup by a 'soft left' current among NUM officials which crystallised during the course of the strike in opposition both to Arthur Scargill and to rank-and-file activists.

Throughout the strike the union bureaucracy were in control. They were able to block any offensive strategy aimed at the steelworks and power stations. Once the strike had shifted onto the defensive,

after Orgreave, the activists found themselves in a stronger position where they organised. To sustain a kitchen, visit inactive strikers, picket their own pits, did not involve the sort of dependence on the officials for petrol money and legal representation which had been so decisive in Nottinghamshire and at Orgreave. Twinning pits with support groups and other workplaces or union branches gave the activists a degree of financial independence from the officials. There were, however, definite limits to this independence. Even in the most solid pits, the militants had neither the strength nor often the will to defy the officials.

A South Yorkshire miner summed it up:

Most pickets recognise the officials will not run things effectively. But the pickets don't have the confidence to take control of things themselves . . . The union officials are in control, but have no answers.

If this was true in militant pits, how much more so was it elsewhere? We have seen how inaction by branch and Area officials allowed the Coal Board to make inroads in the weaker pits. The activists could — and did — hold their own pits together. They could not remedy bureaucratic sabotage elsewhere. Nor could they stand up to a co-ordinated offensive by left officials, who enjoyed a credibility which the right wing lacked, but who wanted to end the strike.

Precisely such an offensive began to develop in the last two months of the strike when a 'soft left' emerged, composed of young and ambitious branch and sometimes Area officials.

There were two meetings of the NUM left on the weekend of 5–6 January. The first, of Communist Party miners, was split between simply continuing the existing, passive strategy, and seeking an end to the strike. A wider meeting of Broad Left officials rejected a strategy of mass picketing 'in case this caused splits on the National Executive'.

The soft left, firmly opposed as they were to mass picketing, seem to have played a key role in engineering the subsequent collapse of the strike. When the idea of a return to work without an agreement surfaced towards the end of January, its key mover was Kim Howells, research officer for the South Wales NUM, and the union's public spokesman. Howells, a former member of the Communist Party, was an articulate exponent of the strategy of relying on public opinion and the churches rather than mass picketing. Although an academic, he was tipped to go far in the union hierarchy.

The idea of going back without an agreement had some attrac-

tions. It was a way of stemming the tide of scabs. It also avoided the humiliation of signing a deal which the Tories had made clear would be a licence to close pits. The struggle could continue — there was much talk among the idea's supporters of 'guerrilla warfare' pit by pit.

But these attractions were vastly outweighed by the disadvantages. The point of the strike in the first place had been to use the *national* strength of the union to win on an issue where individual Areas or pits could not — that of closures.

It was all very well talking about 'guerrilla warfare'. After the suffering and sacrifices involved in a year-long national strike, would miners then throw themselves into pit-by-pit struggles to win what they failed to achieve nationally?

Above all, returning to work without an agreement meant throwing away the NUM's main card — that of being able to keep the militant areas out on strike into the summer of 1985. This not only weakened their hand over pit closures. It meant abandoning those miners who had been victimised by the NCB for their part in the strike.

By the end of the strike 718 miners had been sacked. The final total was likely to be higher, as miners came up in court — for example, over 60 Yorkshire miners had been charged with unlawful assembly. Some were sacked even though they had been acquitted, like Davie Hamilton, Monktonhall delegate and a member of the Scottish Area executive. Going back without an agreement meant leaving these men at the colliery gate. In effect, it would give the NCB *carte blanche* to weed out and victimise the militants.

Scargill moved quickly to denounce the idea. The **Financial Times** reported on 7 February:

Following a radio interview by Dr Kim Howells . . . carefully spelling out the growing feeling in parts of the [South Wales] coalfield that this might be the only way of securing an orderly end to the strike, Mr Scargill hit the telephone to remonstrate forcibly with him. Even if what he had said were true, Mr Scargill insisted it should not have been said.

Scargill was not the only one to oppose the idea. Opposition to a return without an agreement was so strong at the South Wales Area council on 9 February that Howells was stripped of his position as official spokesman.

But the idea had strong backing from the South Wales Area executive, who allowed Howells to keep his job as research officer, no

doubt to continue lobbying for the proposal. The South Wales president, Emlyn Williams, stepped up the pressure for an end to the strike at an Area delegate conference on 13 February.

Why did South Wales so strongly support the idea of a return without agreement? Abandoning victimised miners ran against all the magnificent traditions of solidarity in the South Wales coalfield. But the South Wales leadership was living off past glories. The number of miners in the coalfield had sunk from 271,000 in 1920 to only 21,405 at the start of the 1984–5 strike. The left-wing Area leaders did not attempt to organise a strike against the rundown of the coalfield until 1980. The 1984–5 strike was more solid in South Wales than elsewhere — less than 2 per cent were scabbing at the end of the first week, according to NCB figures, compared with 37 per cent in Scotland, 33 per cent in the North-East, 13 per cent in Yorkshire, and 7 per cent in Kent.

The figures, impressive though they were, were misleading. The Area leadership had consistently opposed mass picketing, relying instead on winning support from a 'broad alliance' including such forces as the Wales Council of Churches. To keep the strike solid the South Wales officials relied on the miners' traditional loyalty to their union, and the strength of the pit communities. The result was a dangerous passivity.

A miner at Maerdy, whose lodge officials were among the first to support a return to work, said:

No union can depend totally on loyalty. This dependence has weakened the strike here. You can't leave workers to what they read in the newspapers and see on TV. You must counteract it.

There's a 1974 attitude among our leadership. They go to the leaders of [other] unions instead of the rank and file . . .

The NUM didn't get solidarity, because the executive kept saying it was a miners' strike and we didn't need other workers on the picket line. At the beginning of the strike I went to Bristol a few times. We got offers from Avonmouth docks and British Aerospace to come onto the picket line. But the union said it was to be miners only. They didn't even like miners' wives on the picket line at first.

The passivity in Wales meant that there had been fewer victimisations — and this made it easier for the Area officials to advocate proposals which meant abandoning victimised strikers to their fate.

In Yorkshire, Jack Taylor's room for manoeuvre was more limited. There was a large group of activists regularly picketing in the Barnsley and Doncaster panels who were likely to oppose a return without an agreement.

But Taylor was provided with an opportunity to undermine the militants when the High Court declared mass picketing at 11 Yorkshire pits illegal on 12 February. The Area executive voted to obey the court ruling, the first instance of any Area formally deciding to comply with a court order. The Area council upheld the decision without discussion or a mandate from the branches. The Area strike co-ordinating committee was disbanded. As far as the Yorkshire officials were concerned mass picketing was over. Miners were instructed to obey the courts' six-man limit.

The reaction from the pickets was anger. One South Kirkby miner said:

Blokes have died. Blokes have been in nick. Lads have been chased with batons, chased with horses and by riot police. And now they come under a bit of pressure our leaders have bottled out.

The NUM branch at Frickley voted to overturn the executive's decision and continue picketing. The branch officials reacted by closing the meeting and walking out. One miner said: 'They were terrified. They just didn't want to know about defying the law.' The meeting was told that pickets who were arrested would not have their fines paid. Nevertheless, activists organised a demonstration of over 500 men and women which marched through the village of South Emsall on 19 February to picket Frickley colliery.

Elsewhere in the Yorkshire coalfield the attitude was similarly defiant. The day before the Frickley demonstration 1,000 people took part in a mass picket and demonstration organised by Armthorpe women's action group. A similar demonstration took place in Edlington a few days later. Sylvia Arrowsmith, a miner's wife in Edlington, said: 'If the men can't or won't picket because of the injunctions then it's up to us women to show the way. We don't belong to the NUM — there's nothing the courts can do to us.'

Such courage and determination could have been tapped by a leadership that wanted to continue the strike. Instead, the officials used their superior resources to overcome rank-and-file opposition. In the days following the Frickley demonstration, the number of

pickets dropped sharply. The branch reversed its earlier decision, and agreed to accept the court injunction 'under protest'. One Frickley miner explained what had happened:

There are two sorts of problems really. One is money. People from the outlying villages such as Upton, which is two miles away from the pit, aren't getting petrol money to come down to the picket line. The other is the feeling that Frickley can't stand on its own without the support from all the other pits.

Once again, as throughout the strike, the Area bureaucracy had been able to overwhelm rank-and-file militancy. The effect was to weaken the core of activists who had held the strike together since the summer. This made life easier for the officials. It also strengthened the hand of the NCB. They now felt confident enough to move coal from Silverwood, one of the most militant pits in the country, for the first time since the strike began.

These blows to the morale and organisation of the pickets meant that, following the collapse of the TUC initiative, the back to work movement began to accelerate rapidly. Miners who until now had been solid began to wonder what was the point of carrying on, seeing that their leaders were busy running the strike down and talking of surrender.

The NCB claimed that a record 3,807 miners went back on Monday 25 February. The Board's figures didn't bear too close examination. Nationally they claimed 91,000 working miners, but NCB area offices released figures totalling only 78,199. At least 75 per cent of the original strikers were still out.

But the trend was clear enough. The return was especially marked in the solid areas. The South Wales leadership paid the price of their reliance on the passive loyalty of their members. The NCB claimed that 552 South Wales miners went back on 25 February, doubling the number of scabs in the coalfield overnight.

By the end of the week, the proportion of miners breaking the strike in South Wales had, according to the Board, multiplied four-fold to 8 per cent. Nationally, the NCB claimed that more than 5 per cent of NUM membership went back that week.

The pressure to surrender was, however, by no means overwhelming. The Yorkshire Area council met that Tuesday and discussed a motion from four pits in the north of the county, calling for a return to work organised by the Area leadership. It was rejected by seventy votes to three.

What swung the union behind surrender, and cracked the determination of some of the most militant pits, was a coup staged by the soft left, who continued to agitate behind the scenes for a return despite its rejection in early February.

Easington in County Durham was, with 2,169 miners, one of the biggest and most militant pits in the country. It had been the victim of one of the most notorious paramilitary police operations back in August, and the village had been under virtual occupation ever since. As we have seen, the activists had been able to involve 500 miners in regular picketing.

If Easington cracked, the reverberations on the other militant pits throughout the coalfields would be enormous. The soft left set to work on Easington lodge secretary Alan Cummings. He received regular phone calls from South Wales after the national delegate conference.

The constant pressure had the intended effect. On the morning of Monday 26 February the Easington lodge committee passed a resolution demanding a Durham Area conference to organise a return to work without an agreement. The motion also proposed that the overtime ban be continued, that miners should refuse to operate the incentive scheme, and that a levy be organised for the victimised strikers. The lodge chairman and NUM executive member, Bill Stobbs, submitted his resignation, but the committee refused to accept it.

The motion was put to a packed branch meeting attended by 1,500 strikers later that morning, and carried. The militants, taken by surprise, didn't have time to organise against the proposal. Many spoke against it, but the committee carried the day by 60-40. Morale collapsed afterwards.

Alan Cummings tried to justify this *volte-face* afterwards:

After conference there was an impasse situation. We've got to be realistic about the present situation. People are going back to work in large numbers. People who have been solid throughout the strike. They can't see any end to it . . .

'What way is there?' he asked desperately. With Scargill silent, the wing of the bureaucracy with a coherent strategy, the soft left, were in an increasingly strong position. They played on the fear of many officials over the forthcoming elections in the union to push their call to end the strike.

The NUM executive meeting on Thursday 28 February lasted



eight hours. Much of the day was spent trying to contact Peter Walker or Coal Board officials. Finally the executive listened to a tape-recording of a telephone conversation in which Kevin Hunt, the NCB's industrial relations director, flatly rejected the NUM's offer to accept the NACODS agreement.

Less than a month previously, Thatcher and Walker had said that the NACODS agreement was 'sacrosanct', and that its acceptance would 'immediately' end the strike. But now the Tories, sensing complete victory, wanted their pound of flesh.

Scargill wanted to fight on, but was overruled by the rest. A national delegate conference would meet that Sunday; meanwhile the Areas would be consulted. The next day the bandwagon for surrender rolled on. Area councils in South Wales, Durham, Lancashire, and Northumberland, along with COSA, voted for a return to work.

Three left Areas held out, with differing degrees of enthusiasm. The Scottish Area executive voted for a return conditional on a 'general amnesty' for victimised miners. The predominantly Communist Party leadership in Scotland had moved sharply leftwards in mid-January, for example organising mass pickets of 1,000 men each at Killoch, Seafield, and Monktonhall. Whether an act of desperation or an attempt to regain some of the ground lost with the militants during the Ravenscraig fiasco, this shift showed what could be done so late in the strike.

Only Kent opposed ending the strike. The 2,163 miners of this tiny coalfield faced the threat of extinction if the strike were lost. All three pits were big loss-makers. Forty-two Kent miners had been sacked, including the entire Betteshanger branch committee.

Most important of all was Yorkshire. The Area council met on Friday afternoon, in the wake of a decision to go back in the nearest militant coalfield, Durham. Despite the pressures exerted from outside, and Jack Taylor's refusal to give a firm lead, the delegates voted to continue the strike 42 to 22. But the supporters of surrender refused to accept their defeat. The council was reconvened on Saturday afternoon to allow delegates to consult their branches. This time a show of hands went 38 to 31 in favour of a return to work — then a card vote went the other way, instructing the Area's conference by 571 votes to 561 to oppose a return without an amnesty.

The whole affair was a classic example of Jack Taylor's leadership style. He was not in a strong enough position to campaign openly for surrender like Emlyn Williams — there were too many militant pits in Yorkshire for that. So he opted for passivity, supporting the status quo and leaving it to lower-rank officials to lobby for a return to work.

Appropriately, the national delegate conference of the NUM which ended the strike on Sunday 3 March met at Congress House, seat of the TUC which had so shamefully betrayed it. The three scab Areas — Nottinghamshire, South Derbyshire and Leicestershire, stayed away.

The South Wales resolution — for a return to work on Tuesday and negotiations for an amnesty — was carried 98–91.

Scargill, flanked by Peter Heathfield and Mick McGahey, spoke to the world's press. The NUM would continue to fight pit closures. The miners' president praised the striking communities: 'Men and women have fought a fight that has not been seen anywhere in the world.' And he pointed the finger of guilt at the TUC general council: 'The trade union movement in Britain, with a few notable exceptions, have left this union isolated. They have not carried out TUC conference decisions, to their eternal shame.'

The Kent miners' leader, Jack Collins, spoke angrily for many when he left Congress House that afternoon: 'It's a decision that the British miners will live to regret and that the trade union movement will live to regret. The people who have decided to go back to work and leave men on the sidelines, to unload these men, are the traitors of the trade union movement.'

He was right. The miners' strike did not die a natural death. It was helped on its way by those left-wing officials who were not willing to fight on in the militant strongholds in the hope of at least saving the jobs of victimised strikers.

The Tories were exultant. Thatcher, her eyes on the opinion polls, aped magnanimity. Somehow it was worse than if she had cried 'Rejoice!', especially when she spoke of the miners' families 'who have gone through an awful lot of suffering' — thanks to her orders, to the police occupation of their villages, and the attempts of the DHSS to starve them.

Peter Walker twisted the knife in the wound: even if miners were acquitted of crimes they might still be sacked, he told the House of Commons. Neil Kinnock, statesmanlike to the last, agreed that miners guilty of 'vicious crimes' should be sacked. Students at Haringay college of further education showed what they thought of this by pelting Kinnock with rotten tomatoes.

Emlyn Williams tried to justify his treachery by even-handedly attacking both Kinnock and Scargill — the latter had shown 'lack of guts and lack of leadership', he said, for not making a recommendation to the conference. There were signs of revulsion in the South



Armthorpe marches back to work: 8 March 1985

Wales coalfield. Three hundred miners at Trelewis Drift voted to stay out.

The Great Miners' Strike officially ended on Tuesday 5 March in as much confusion as it had begun 51 weeks before. The mass of strikers marched back to work behind their branch banners, sometimes with bands playing.

An estimated 27,000 miners stayed out. Some were Scottish and Kent miners in support of their Area decisions. Half the Yorkshire miners refused to cross picket lines consisting of strikers from Armthorpe and Hatfield and men from Kent. At Trelewis Drift they did the same. These actions were attempts more to wrest concessions from local NCB bosses about the fate of sacked men than to continue the strike. Its back had been broken by Sunday's conference.

Whenever they returned, the miners did so defiantly and with pride. They were beaten, but they had held out for a year against the worst that the state could inflict on them. Like their forebears in 1926, the miners had, in A. J. Cook's words, fought the 'legions of hell'. They, and the women who had endured with them the longest major strike in British history were all heroes, every one of them. They were magnificent. They deserved better than what was in store for them.

The lessons of 1926

The miners had lost. But how big a defeat was it, both for them and for the wider labour movement?

It is worth considering the comparisons which were inevitably drawn between 1984-5 and the General Strike of 1926. There were very obvious parallels between the two struggles. The miners were at the centre of both. 1926 too pitted the trade union movement against a much better-prepared opponent.

The miners were deserted even more flagrantly in 1926, when the TUC leaders called off the General Strike after nine days, leaving the MFGB to struggle on alone for over seven months. The general council made incompetent efforts to negotiate on the miners' behalf, just as Norman Willis did. The scale of state repression was enormous: there were 9,000 arrests in the whole of 1926, compared to 9,778 during the 1984-5 strike. To cap it all, Labour leader Ramsay MacDonald supported the 1926 strike as grudgingly as Neil Kinnock did nearly sixty years later.

The historian John Foster summed up the effects of the 1926 defeat:

The TUC right-wingers, despite all their betrayals, were able to take the offensive against the left. 'Never again' became a by-word for the following generation. Under the 1927 Trade Disputes Act general strikes and most sympathy strikes became illegal. Trade union membership fell by half a million. And parallel to the harassment and victimisation of the left by the government and the employers, bans and proscriptions were launched in individual trade unions. In almost every union right-wing dominance was ensured for the following decade — with all that this meant in terms of neutralising the mass organisations of the working class in a period of acute economic crisis.¹

Some were quick to draw the conclusion that the same would happen in 1985. **The Guardian** confidently predicted:

The defeat of the miners will be seen as a landmark in the decline of the industrial working class and advocates of political strike action. It is unlikely that the unions will again mount such a general and co-ordinated challenge to the authority of the state . . . Union strength and membership was in decline well before the miners' strike, and that process is likely to accelerate.²

But the differences between 1926 and 1985 are as important as similarities. The most important single difference was that there was no general strike in 1984–5. The sectional divisions in the working class were much greater than in 1926: hence the blacklegging in Nottinghamshire and the more general failure of other groups of workers to support the miners. This sectionalism was, of course, a great source of weakness, but it meant that the miners' defeat was not felt so directly and bitterly by other workers.

The very depth of the solidarity in 1926 meant that when the TUC general council precipitately called the General Strike off on 12 May every section of the class was threatened with defeat. Employers in industries other than mining exploited the collapse of the strike to victimise militants. The railway companies, for example, posted notices stating that strikers, having broken their contracts, were dismissed, and would be re-employed only individually.

Rank-and-file resistance (there were more on strike on 13 May, *after* the strike was called off, than the day before) forced the bosses to negotiate with the unions. But the terms were humiliating: the rail unions admitted that, 'in calling a strike, they committed a wrongful

act against the companies', and accepted wage-cuts and the sacking of 'persons who have been guilty of violence or intimidation'. Agreements such as this led to tens of thousands of victimisations.

Solidarity in 1984–5 was much more diffuse. Apart from a small minority of brave railworkers and seafarers, few trade unionists put their necks on the line for the miners. However, the financial support given the miners in 1984–5 was far more than in 1926. **The Guardian** estimated that the NUM may have received as much as £60 million.

Another reason why the defeat of 1984–5 was unlikely to hit the working-class movement as hard as that of 1926 is that the miners were a much smaller proportion of the class. In 1921 there were 1,132,000 miners, 6.3 per cent of the working population; in 1983 the deep coal-mine workforce was 231,600, less than one per cent. Coal mining was the biggest single industry, and the main source of energy for British industry, and of heating for ordinary homes till the 1960s, an all-pervasive part of social and economic life. By the time of the 1984–5 strike this was no longer true. In 1922 miners formed nearly 15 per cent of all trade unionists; by 1984 they were only 2.3 per cent.

Nevertheless, the miners still form a sizeable proportion of the working class in certain regions: in 1981 coal accounted for 21.1 per cent of male employment in the East Midlands, 15.6 per cent in Yorkshire and Humberside, 11.5 per cent in the North, and 12.2 per cent in Wales.

If the miners' weight in the labour movement was far less than in 1926, they were still important strategically, because of their past defeats and victories. But they were now a small part of a larger and more diverse trade union movement: there were slightly more than 5 million trade unionists in 1926, more than 10 million in 1984. This made it easier for other workers to sustain the mining communities in 1984–5, but it also meant that the NUM's defeat affected a far smaller proportion of the organised working class than in 1926.

Not only was the trade union movement larger than in 1926: it was in better shape. The recession of the early 1920s caused union membership to collapse, from 8.3 million in 1920 to 5.6 million two years later. An employers' offensive effectively gutted workplace organisation; the engineering lockout of 1922 wiped out the shop stewards' movement which had grown up during the First World War. Real wages fell in the first half of the 1920s.

By comparison, although trade union membership fell after 1979, this was the result of mass unemployment and the proportion of union members among employed workers remained steady. Work-

place organisation had been eroded by the recession, but not destroyed. The number of shop stewards was estimated at 300,000. They existed in a far wider range of workplaces than twenty years before — notably the civil service, local government, and the health service. Real wages rose during Thatcher's first term in government.

Above all, the mood of the miners at the end of the 1984–5 strike was radically different to their morale at the end of the 1926 lockout. After 1926 they were completely demoralised, with about a quarter of them unemployed, and tens of thousands in the 'Spencer' union in Nottinghamshire, South Wales, Durham and elsewhere. The miners of 1985 went back after the strike with heads held high.

Consequently, the Tories were unlikely to ride roughshod over the rest of the working class in the wake of the miners' defeat. Attacks there would be: after all, Thatcher had deferred struggles on other fronts to deal with the miners. The railway unions in particular were now likely to face a productivity offensive. But there was no reason to believe that there would be no resistance. Indeed, as the miners' strike dragged to its conclusion, teachers launched a succession of selective strikes in support of their pay claim.

There was one respect in which the pattern of 1926 was likely to be followed. The miners were then, as in 1984–5, on the sharp end of a generalised ruling-class offensive. Stanley Baldwin made his aim clear in July 1925: 'All the workers of this country have got to take reductions in wages to help put industry on its feet.'

The sheer depth of support for the General Strike, however, took the government and employers by surprise. Some sections of big industrial capital decided that collaboration with the trade union leaders made more sense than frontal assault. The talks which followed, organised by Sir Alfred Mond, the chairman of ICI, between the TUC and the bosses of 22 big firms, helped to entrench a philosophy of class collaboration among the trade union leaders.

The 1980s equivalent is the 'new realism' that had already been put forward at the 1983 TUC Congress, but then been stymied by GCHQ and the miners' strike. With both safely out of the way, the centre-right majority on the TUC general council could now pursue closer relations with the government and employers.

Indeed, the strike had forced the Tories and the union bosses to collaborate. The **Financial Times** reported after the collapse of the TUC initiative: 'The TUC and the Government — particularly Mr Peter Walker . . . have moved more closely together than they have been.'³

The 'new realism' had been the policy of the centre-right — of such figures as Len Murray and Alistair Graham. But the shift towards accommodation with the Tories could be observed on the trade union left as well. One of the government's biggest successes since its re-election had been increasing trade-union compliance with their legislation — first the defeat of the NGA at Warrington, then the abandonment of the NUM to its fate at the hands of the courts, and — last but by no means least — Austin Rover's use of the 1984 Trade Union Act against eight unions for not holding a strike ballot in November 1984.

Now there were signs that the Transport and General Workers Union, anchor of the TUC left, was considering retreating from the position of unconditional opposition to the Tory anti-union laws adopted by the Wembley Congress in 1982. The **Financial Times** reported on 25 January 1984 a strategy conference of TGWU officials:

Mr Ron Todd, general secretary-elect, made it clear in a keynote speech that . . . there was no real pressure on the union to change its present position on the law. But he did say to the conference that if the union were to suffer a large number of blows arising out of the legislation, it might be necessary to reconsider its position . . . He confirmed, too, that he had proposed a much more tactical approach by the union in its present position to the government's labour laws. In particular, the general mood of the conference seemed to be in line with suggestions from key centre-right figures in the TUC that unions and TUC should really support disputes only where there seemed from the outset a strong likelihood of victory.

There had been a similar coming together of left and right on the general council after 1926. Even here, it would be a mistake to exaggerate the similarities with 1926 and its aftermath. Class-collaborationist trade unionism flourished in one form or other from the late 1920s to the early 1960s. Its success depended upon certain objective conditions. Having fallen earlier, real wages actually *rose* by 10 per cent between 1926 and 1935.

The reason was simple. The prices of primary products — food and raw materials — fell sharply during the Great Slump which began in 1929. British capitalism, with its vast Empire, was in an especially strong position to take advantage of this situation. Under the protectionist policies adopted in 1931, the colonies were forced to exchange cheap food and raw materials for British manufactured goods. Tradi-

tional industries such as mining and shipbuilding stagnated, but some workers were able to find jobs in new protected industries like cars and electrical engineering. And though money wages fell, the cost of living fell faster, so that those workers with jobs were better off.

In effect, the British ruling class used the Empire to cushion workers from the worst effects of the slump, rather than stage the sort of offensive which led to the General Strike. Cheap food bought social peace. The real price was paid by tens of millions of colonial peasants and labourers. Then the war economy and afterwards the great boom of the 1950s and 1960s brought most workers jobs and rising living standards.

The collaboration between employers and union leaders after 1926 depended for its success on being able to deliver improvements in living standards. But British capitalism no longer can afford to concede such improvements. It is a declining and uncompetitive part of a world system that is itself in crisis. The Empire is long gone, and with it the surplus fat which allowed British capital to ride out the 1930s comparatively easily.

Real wages did rise steadily under Margaret Thatcher's first government. But, though this bought electoral success and limited working-class resistance, it could not be allowed to continue. The need to force down wages and thereby to increase the rate of profit underlay the Tory assault on the miners.

It followed that further attacks on other groups of workers were inevitable. Even quite right-wing trade union leaders may fight back if attacked, if only in a bureaucratic and timid fashion. Their power depends on that of workers' organisations — so they have a vested interest in preserving trade unions' basic strength. The 'new realism' was likely to have an uneasy and turbulent life.

The fate of the trade union movement generally is a matter of speculation. Of the miners it could be said with certainty that the struggle was only beginning. They were likely to face attacks on several fronts.

First, Ian MacGregor would press ahead with his plans to subordinate the coal industry and its workforce to the imperatives of the market. This did not mean merely pressing ahead with closures. Even before the strike had ended, the Board had approved plans to reorganise its structure. The headquarters staff would be dramatically cut, and a large share of power devolved onto the area and pit managers. The latter would be given a share of NCB profits in exchange for increasing output. New markets would be sought in an effort to reduce the

NCB's dependence on the electricity industry. The **Financial Times** summed up the logic of MacGregor's strategy: 'There is no doubt that the ultimate implication is break-up and privatisation.'⁴

Secondly, the NCB were intent on using the gains they had made during the strike to establish much greater control inside the pits themselves. Derek Law, manager of Silverwood in South Yorkshire, told the **FT**: 'We've got a faction of about 30 to 40 real militants and this is an ideal time to sort them out. Before the strike we took a soft line and the result is we have trained left-wingers.'⁵

Colliery managers talked of relying much less on the old system of continuous consultation with the NUM, and of sending full-time branch officials back down the pit. The bosses at British Leyland had done that to most senior stewards after workplace organisation had been defeated in the car factories by Michael Edwardes.

Another technique which Edwardes had pioneered, with the support of his deputy chairman, Ian MacGregor, was that of directly appealing to workers over the heads of their union leaders through letters and even personal visits. The Coal Board had acquired much experience of these methods through their efforts to orchestrate scabbing. Now they would no longer be prepared to talk to miners solely through the intermediary of their union. MacGregor said on 4 March: 'The management of this industry have learned to communicate directly with the people under their control.'

In the same speech he referred to his hope that 'a representative leadership' of the NUM would emerge. This was the third prong of the attacks the miners would now face. The Tories seemed less interested in encouraging a scab breakaway union than in using the blackleg organisation centred on Nottinghamshire to topple Arthur Scargill and the other left-wing union leaders.

The leading article in **The Times** the day after the miners decided to go back spelled out the strategy of the Tory right:

this strike is about a divided union and the struggle by working miners to rescue their union from the Communists and ultra-leftists who have hijacked its leadership . . . The struggle for control of the NUM will not end simply because all members . . . return to work tomorrow. Indeed, with the strike over, it will enter its most critical though less visible phase . . .

The strike has been defeated . . . But the hard left's grip on the NUM leadership has not yet been defeated. That is tomorrow's struggle within the NUM . . . The moderate miners

. . . deserve the moral support of the government.⁶

The Times has become, since Rupert Murdoch took it over in 1981, an uncritical exponent of Thatcherism. Among its columnists is David Hart, adviser to Thatcher and MacGregor and their contact with the miners who worked through the strike. The same day **The Times** leader appeared, the National Working Miners' Committee announced plans to seek a court order forcing the NUM to hold a ballot under the 1984 Trade Union Act to elect the national executive, with the aim of eventually removing Scargill from the union presidency.

Whether these various strategies came to fruition was a matter for the future. It was clear, though, that the miners would face an uphill battle to protect their jobs and working conditions, and to preserve and strengthen their organisation. Here the experience of the 1920s and 1930s had positive lessons.

For union organisation *was* rebuilt. It grew out of struggle. The very scale of the employers' offensive forced isolated groups of miners to put up bitter resistance. Usually at the centre of these battles was the Communist Party, in those days a very different organisation which, despite its Stalinist politics, sought to lead workers' struggles.

One example was at Lumphinnans in the Fife coalfield, where after 1926 the coal companies drove through modernisation schemes which had previously encountered stiff resistance. Thousands of jobs were lost, accidents and dust increased. But, most important of all, the companies changed their methods of payment from piecework to subcontracting or a simple day wage.

Disputes in the Lumphinnans pits usually arose out of the new conditions and methods of payment. Deputies were constantly chivvying men to work harder and to continue on past the end of the working day, threatening them that if they refused, there were plenty of men prepared to do so.⁷

Despite the victimisations, pit closures and unemployment in the area, the workers were so provoked that the militants could organise a series of guerrilla strikes. Alex and Abe Moffat, two leading Communist Party members in the Fife pits, fought to become checkweighers, responsible to the men for ensuring that they were paid for all the coal they had cut. They soon won improvements, until the management had them removed by court order.

But the Moffats found a further loophole. They were elected as safety inspectors with a legally enforceable right to inspect the

pits. Over the next few years, both they and other Communist safety inspectors carried out regular inspections of both pits, directing attention to dampness, poor ventilation, dangerous machinery, insecure roofing and other dangers. Sometimes the company refused them admission and sometimes it used hooters and water-hoses to prevent meetings at the pit-head, but this basic right, which had been lost in most other pits, was maintained at Lumphinnans.⁸

The re-building of the union in the Nottinghamshire coalfield, which was the stronghold of the scab 'Spencer' union after 1926, would also have been impossible without the work of members of the Communist Party. The Harworth strike of 1936-7 which finally re-established the MFGB in Notts was a product of patient work by Communist Party member Mick Kane, who became the union branch president, and built it up from seven members in 1935 to 302 a year later. Kane paid a heavy price for the eventual defeat of Spencerism. He was sentenced to two years' imprisonment on a riot charge arising from the strike.

It was thus agitation around often small but concrete issues which re-established trade unionism as a fighting force in the coalfields after 1926. The example was very relevant to the miners as they returned to work in March 1985. Coal Board managers would be eager to restore production as quickly as possible. Even though, as we have seen, they planned to establish much greater control over the work process, their need to raise output would give the miners something to bargain with. Especially in pits where scabbing had been comparatively low, and where a fighting spirit was preserved to the end, militants would be able to find issues around which to organise.

There was, however, one last lesson of 1926. It was the activity of *socialist* miners which was central to rebuilding after the lockout. What were the political implications of the great miners' strike?